

CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND THE LAW OF LOVE* IN THE CHURCH

Video Lecture Series

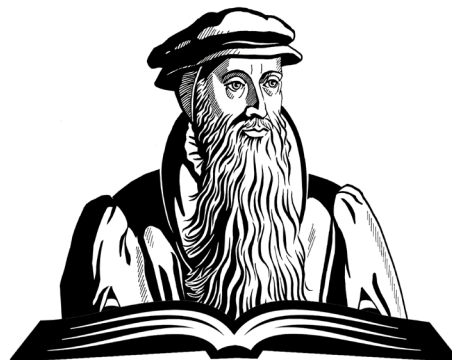
by Pastor A. T. Vergunst

Module 1

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 1

Introduction



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 1 ~

Conflict Resolution in the Church

- 1. Introduction**
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CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND* THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 1 **Introduction**

Dear friends, welcome to the studies on the subject of the well-being of the church in the kingdom of God. This group of lectures will detail God's teaching on how to aim at the unity and the peace within the church, or more accurately, within the family of God. Unity and peace are critical to the kingdom of God. Division and disunity have always been Satan's chief weapons in weakening the church of God. And when that happens, it will be harmful to the further building of God's worldwide kingdom. And why is that true? Well, it's because the healthy and the well-functioning church is the tool God uses for the extension of his kingdom. As we all know, the family is the key, the cornerstone to the prosperity of our society. And likewise, the local church family, or the household of God, is crucial for the well-being of God's worldwide kingdom. All believers in the Lord belong to his universal or worldwide body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, it is a fact that we mostly interact personally with fellow believers in our local churches. It is with this local focus that we will study the Lord's various practical instructions about maintaining unity, or preventing disunity, as well as restoring unity.

Our first study will concentrate on Jesus' teaching from Matthew 18, verses 15 to 35. This passage lays out the Lord's orders in dealing with conflict resolution among the members of a local church. Friends, as long as we live outside of Paradise, there will always be issues that bring strain or stress among believers. Even worse, if not dealt with, these sin issues can lead to ugly divisions. The history of God's church confirms the truth that wherever God builds his kingdom, the devil begins to work full time to hinder it and to destroy it. And what is Satan's strategy in this warfare against God's kingdom? It always has been to divide and conquer. Now, the easiest way to destroy a strong, solid nation is to make it self-destruct. So, provoking a civil war will be the least costly and the most effective to an enemy. The exact strategy Satan has used effectively, as he seeks to destroy God's kingdom, is that—divide and conquer. Outright persecution tends to pull the kingdom people together and actually make them stronger. But inward tensions of division and infighting will quickly weaken the kingdom. It also will make it unattractive to the unbelievers. For who would want to join those who can't get along together?

So, in these studies, we will focus on the will of the Lord Jesus in how to resist Satan's destructive strategies of divide and conquer. His strategy is two-pronged. The Lord says, focus on maintaining purity in doctrine and life, and secondly, on maintain unity among the brethren. It is noticeable how both are uppermost in the Lord Jesus' own prayer in John 17. In John 17, verses 8 and 17, Jesus prays about the purity in truth. He prays, "For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, . . . Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." Towards the end of his prayer, he prays for unity among the brethren. He says, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou has sent me"—this is John 17:21. So clearly, both are intimately related. True unity can only exist in tandem with purity of doctrine and life. The well-known London preacher, Spurgeon, said rightfully, "I am quite sure that the best way to promote union is to promote truth." And Jonathan Edwards, used by God in the Great Awakening in America in the seventeenth century, said, "Christianity cannot flourish in a time of strife and contention among its own professors." So, it ought, therefore, not to come as a surprise that the Lord Jesus, through the words of his apostles, has spoken directly and abundantly on maintaining peace among the saints, and how to maintain this. So, let me walk you through a sampling of the main New Testament scriptures in which the Lord emphasizes the unity and the peace among the brethren.

First, let's go to the example of the new Christian church upon Pentecost. In Acts 4, verse 32, we read, "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul." The unity and peace is there. In Acts 9, verse 31, we read the beautiful testimony, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied." So the church grew in this setting of peace.

Now, quite a number of exhortations are given in the epistles of Paul and others. For example, Romans 12, verse 16: "Be of the same mind one toward another." Romans 14:19, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." Romans 15, verses 5 and 6, "Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded toward another according to Christ Jesus: that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now again, 1 Corinthians 1:10, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." Second Corinthians 13:11, "Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you." Ephesians 4:1 to 3, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation"—or the calling—"wherewith ye were called"—again—"with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And we move on to Philippians 1:27, "That ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." And in Philippians 2:2, Paul adds: "Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind." Moving on to Peter's epistle, in 1 Peter 3:8, "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous."

Now, clearly this repeated emphasis of scriptures ought to convince all Jesus' followers that to the Head of the church, unity and peace is high on the list of priorities. And the reason for this emphasis is not only that dwelling together in unity is good and pleasant for the brethren, it is mostly

good, and pleasant, and glorifying to God himself. As Jesus mentored his young and immature disciples, there were two clear occasions that the peace and unity among the little group was in great danger. The first one is found in Matthew 20, verses 20 to 28, where through the agency of their mother, James and John vie for the highest places. Yet it was not only the problem of these two, for in Matthew 20, verse 24, it is recorded, “And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.”

Now, in the second example, in Luke 22, verses 23 and 24, we find the disciples busy in proving who among them ought to be considered the greatest. Almost teenager-like, they were bragging about themselves, all trying to establish their greatness. And why? to be excused from doing one another a favor. Now, most likely their efforts to be excused was in connection with the scene we read in John 13, where Jesus gathered with his disciples for his last Passover meal with them. Someone needed to do the washing of the feet—a task ordinarily done by a slave or a servant. But each of Jesus’ disciples considered himself too important to do that lowly work. The Lord’s response in both instances is stunning and exemplary. With a gentle rebuke and clear teaching, he nipped this threat to the unity in the bud. In Matthew 20, he did this with golden teaching about who in his kingdom is actually the greatest. He says, he that serves the others is the greatest. He concluded this with the example of himself. He says, “Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Now, in Luke 22, he repeated this teaching, but then he accompanied it with his personal action of washing his own disciples’ feet, as is recorded in John 13. My friends, what a moving display of the glory of our Master, Jesus Christ, the Son of God! And when finished, he gave this direction, as you read in John 13 verses 12 to 15—“Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.”

Now, in this study, we will sit at Jesus’ feet, to consider his teaching in Matthew 18, verses 15 to 35. I will combine this with other relevant scriptures on the subject, such as Galatians 6, verse 1, and Luke 17, verses 1 to 6. But in Matthew 18, Jesus has outlined the pathway how to maintain unity of the body in the face of a serious and disruptive sin. And the importance of this subject cannot be enough emphasized, for if we do not deal Biblically, and lovingly, and faithfully with the issues of sin and conflict, we will lose our main ally in the kingdom—the Holy Spirit. Paul warned about the grieving of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4:30—“And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.” In the context of Ephesians 4, Paul is dealing with effective and loving communication among the believers. And if the communication among the brethren is negative through sinful anger, lying speech, bitterness, lack of forgiveness—the Holy Spirit will be grieved. And brethren, no condition is more to be feared for the prosperity and strength of the kingdom, than when the Holy Spirit is grieved. The Spirit is grieved. He stands back. He will withhold his sanctifying and his uniting influences. He will let the wounds fester, and he may even depart from a fellowship, as Jesus’ warns abundantly, in the letters to the seven churches, in Revelation 2 and 3.

When, in those broken or Spirit-abandoned fellowships, we trace back where the decay began, it will often reveal that it began when one sin was excused. For departing from God’s ways always begins the same way! It begins with one small step onto the wrong path! One sin excused will lead to more sins excused. The way of sin is always a slippery slope. Leaving a sin issue in the church family, is like leaving a splinter in the ball of your heel. Now, left on its own, it will make walking difficult. If untreated, it will eventually fester, and infection which can even lead to more

dysfunction, and even death. So, let us implore God for his blessing, as we explore this vastly important subject together.

Our theme, on basis of Matthew 18, will be, in these next sessions, God's way of solving sin problems—loving, and gentle, but clear confrontation is the way. Now before we look closely and in detail at this scripture, let me lay down a few principles that will guide us. The first principle is that we need to be clear about the Lord commands us to confront our brothers, if they sin against us in any manner. This is clear from verse 15, in Matthew 18. He says, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go, and tell him." Jesus echoes the same direction, in Luke 17:3—"Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him."

Now, doing this confrontation is, according to the Lord's own teaching, an act of real love. Listen to Leviticus 19:17, where God says, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." Did you hear that? Leaving any sin undisturbed is allowing the sinner to be lost. And therefore, the loving act is not to ignore it, not to ignore a sin that disturbs, or destroys, or separates—it is to confront the offender in love.

Now, if you turn to Genesis 3—the opening chapters of the Bible—you see how God confronted Adam and Eve. He didn't come storming into Paradise, threatening, or thundering in his displeasure. Instead, he invited them in a gentle question: "Where are you?" In other words, he said, "I want to see you!" Though hurt, though offended, though dishonored by their actions, he seeks to make it right, and he doesn't want us to hide from him. And notice that God also didn't skirt or ignore the sin. Instead, he confronted them. He named it. He shamed it. He took off the cover. But what was God's motivation? It was love—it was love. By his seeking and by his confronting their sin, God said to them, "Look, Adam and Eve, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." In other words, "I have no pleasure in the state of separation between me and you through sin."

Now, you move on to Genesis, chapter 4—the same thing happened. He lovingly confronts Cain about his sin, in order to lead him to repentance, and to keep him from more sin! Now, God saw in Cain the first steps on the slippery slope of disobedience. There was jealousy in his heart, there was anger, there was murderous thoughts dwelling in his heart. And with love, he warned Cain, "If you do well, shalt you not be accepted?" And if you do not well, sin lies, like a crouching lion ready to pounce you at the door. Friends, what was God's motivation? It was his love—it was his care about Cain.

But perhaps you wonder whether confrontation contradicts another scripture, in 1 Peter 4:8, where God says, "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity"—or love—"shall cover the multitude of sins." Yet the principles the Lord Jesus here lays down are clear. He says when sins are committed out of infirmity, or immaturity, or weakness, or thoughtlessness, deal with them with love. Now, as parents, we don't call attention to every weakness and every mistake our immature and young children make. Now, they are young. They are clumsy. They are immature. They may spill the milk, or they may fail to do a chore perfectly, yet they didn't intend to do either. And so it is with sin. But when sins are done that cause bitterness, or anger, or irritation, or separation, or spite, and bring ongoing conflicts, they are to be confronted and removed, for they will continue to destroy, and destroy more and more.

So, the second thing we ought to be clear about is the truth that, contrary to our expectations, loving confrontation according to Jesus' detailed instructions, will bring blessings to all the parties involved. Notice in Matthew 18, verse 15, where it says it will gain you your brother. In James 5, verses 19 and 20, the Lord added this encouragement to confrontation: "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converts the sinner from

the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” that lie in the train of one sin.

So clearly, after this introduction, we are ready to make a detailed study of our Lord’s orders, in Matthew 18, verses 15 to 20. And I look forward leading you into that study. May God add his blessings to our efforts. Thank you.